Notes on Colour
Rangituhia Hollis

On Form

As it’s becoming an image, the form can be seen on a screen but is mostly in your head. Part still being made by the actions of your hands and the rest flickering in the retina of your eyes. While it’s maybe in the present that the image becomes an image, it’s in the past that it will always reside, drenched in the history that it brings forth, if not for the viewer then for the maker at least:
As I ate the oysters with their strong taste of the sea and their faint metallic taste that the cold white wine washed away, leaving only the sea taste and the succulent texture, and as I drank their cold liquid from each shell and washed it down with the crisp taste of the wine, I lost the empty feeling and began to be happy and to make plans.

Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, 1964

I’ve tasted the sea in my lungs. I’ve bitten meat from the shell. Felt the scraping gnaw of sinew cut against my teeth. Felt the sense of something heading toward my belly. And also drunk white wine from a never-ending glass. Floated full and buoyant back then, dancing across the floor. Drowning in the feeling of abundance. But then with drowning, you lose all good sense. When you give up to it then you’re gone.

On Colour

No stars tonight. Just an ominous light, like what you might see with the dawn. Subtle, red-filled, backlit, rear-projected. Something must be going to emerge. Last night on earth, and the cloud cover seems like it’s spread from a smoke machine with a wide gate release. But the sky is still, it’s late and nothing is moving. The longer I look, the deeper the colour gets. I went inside and came back out, and I look up again and only see blue till I sit awhile. Took a photo from the step. Seeing the wrinkles on my hands and the light from my phone tinting the tips of my eyelashes. The camera can’t capture it, but eyes see panorama as well as the macro. Red, white and grey. Whiter, softer plumes of clouds look like they’re drifting from smokestacks. Colour can’t capture it all either, this street is sound. The sky as a chamber. With the ever-nearing urgency of a passing car, I hear your foot on the gas and your need to get home. When I look for a long time, I see things in raster. I see this life is made out of pixels that when taken in make for an apricot sky. Light that fills the deep part of your eyes. Soft, and then a bloom. With a black-toned storm hitting the edges.
The crickets on either side of the path purr with a softness as I walk back and forth across the concrete. The cicadas, loud earlier on, have quietened. The heat of the day has subsided. A cool breeze across my face, then on my back as I turn, pacing, look up to the top of the house. I can’t see but I can hear the ocean of cars, as relentless as waves breaking.

‘That there’s the house …’, my cousin pointed out, ‘… from Ngati … it’s where they filmed that sick boy, and where they sung for him and where he died.’ I could barely see the house as waves washed my shoulders and my head bobbed in the water like a crayfish buoy trying to remain afloat.

‘Iri te Kura, too’, he continued, ‘it was in the film.’ Ah, Iri te Kura, I knew better. That was a place of laughter and food, of aunties with lollies and cousins to play with and although it was sort of hidden, obscured by rows of pines, I knew where it was ‘cause I had good memories of being on the marae.
‘And your old man’s house, eh,’ he pointed again, ‘it’s up on that other hill.’

‘Yea’, yeah, and all of them grew up there in that small house?’

‘Yep, all around here.’

Then a big wave came closer; we readied to catch it and were back to swimming.

I recall the sea in regular wakes, imagine cicadas loud, like planes overhead. Walking through long grasses – dried, bleached white by the sun. Arms aside. Legs making/following paths, fingertips through the brittle, rustling grasses. Down to the beach and the new architecture erected there. Ad hoc structures made out of necessity. Shacks – liveable through the summers, abandoned in winter. And then the beach.

I am colour, as my skin allows. I am faint in winter and glow in summer. Glow only when dragged out. I want to be dark. Like charcoal. Like my father. The one they called black soap. I have tried to be that too – black. I fell asleep once on the sand of Waipiro, waking burnt red. My skin peeled for days. After that my mind became addled by the sun, and I think I stayed that way. Addled by trying to overdose. By trying to drown in the sand of a place that I could only get to for a few days. That’s my locus. A pivot point. Waipiro, the home of my father. Waipiro of the houses of thousands. The red house of Iri-te-kura. The blue house of Taharora. I sink into the turquoise waters of Taharora by entering the door. Like leaving the grounds of the urupa, where I wash my hands and flick the water up. To erase tapu. Likewise I pass under the vagina of Hine-nui-te-po and into the wharekai, and tapu is gone.

On Light

In the big smoke, in our big building that is its own hill, smokers use the well to draw in and exhale. I take a deep breath and inhale the dust that’s been kicked up. Fine nebulaic particles swirling round – the fluid stuff of universe-making and carcinogenic tumour-growing. Fine, fine dust. I recline, to smoke the casing air of roadside seating. A deep inhale and I taste the chill on my tongue of those frozen out. Roll around those words of defeat in my mouth long enough that I might turn them into weapons. Out here what grows more and more the focus of mind is the warmth of each other. And why? Eh! Ata! To cling thoughts to every bit of heat makes its increase inevitable. Hell! It works for demons, works for fear, then why not basic needs – energy invested and expended – to keep the ever-fleeting energy in, and by will alone produce heat.
This is Māua, Māua e – and there’s no beautiful harmonics heard singing ‘Tātau, Tātau e’ out here. You’re singing to yourself. And there’s no place for ‘he iwi tahi tātau’ bullshit here, never was. It’s us and them. This is the time of Māua – the ‘we but not you’ of impersonal pronouns. Actually, there’s not much out here, naught but Annabelle and I hiding from view. It’s just us looking deep into where the pilgrims circled the wagons. We had been trying to get there for years. Been waiting for a way to climb up from the last place we climbed to. But each step, each step up to places higher than before is met with the same gravity. Everyone everywhere is tenuously balanced on the cusp of falling, or already fallen. We ain’t middle class but we’re practising. Got the first step down, which is to fear that this life’ll all end with a thud! And another brown couple will hit the dirt. Brain says, ‘Get back to your feet’. Rising, I check to see if I left an impression in the earth. Brain says, ‘You will always get back up, what else you gonna do’. So I stand and shake off of my clothes. Annabelle’s already up and running off into the horizon. A good time to get out if ever there was one.
Our traffic will at times overflow. Murmur in segue, implode in haemorrhage, have the circulative failure and collapse. For if there were no stopping there would be no notion of inertia. There would be no wearing down of this machine into the pavement. We need the spectre of our gradual disappearance to keep our sense that things inevitably will end, so that we can savour the present. Here in this city we fall into place as witnesses, who stay out to see the night gradually dissipate the capping sky, and the street become elevated. Here we see distances fold and a realisation emerge that we are all well and good beneath artificial light. A rhythm of neon and fluorescent light radiates to fill to the borders of our space, tracing a disappearance at their edges. Here, new interiors are made and hidden. Look around and see gradients slope downward, out of sight. Distances just seem to gradually slip from the midplane of passing cars and passing people to sink into the ambience of closed offices and stores. We pass empty alcoves, protecting dim forms behind glass. The street level rises, driveways dip between buildings. And it’s here in this text, within its loose framework, that we could, if you think off in tangents and broad minded-like, explore Māoriness as an implicit and disparate monument within the everyday. And why not? This text is more experimental than it is decisive and certain. In its body we can draw in texts to make a Māoriness near and close – a small interior of our own. We can make it that it was nearby where the boy Tama in Witi Ihimaera’s short story Tangi turned away from the lights of mourning and include his dilemma to bring on board a historical and intergenerational problematic of isolation and support.
It could be these artificial lights that were above him and shining an insularity. If he was here, we also know that he was aggrieved, so his head was probably held low. Walking with his eyes low too, scanning over pavement, ‘the cold stone’. Then the source of Ihimaera’s metaphor could have been a smoke thrown down, and sparks scraped up off of concrete – alight like new years’ fireworks. Each discard sounding a ‘Bang! Bang!’ In repetitions, patterns, bulbing outward in icicle perfection from off the pavement. With light stems that fall or fly from each centre comes an immersing veil of beautiful white light, with our shadowy figures surrounding. Maybe Tama turned to lights such as these, that burn out before ever really touching the ground, or that shine without ever generating heat. And he looked around and felt the cold of when you realise that what supported you was impermanent, and likewise that we, too, are of that same ephemeral substance. His worries are not quite the same as ours, we only need consider whether or not our time this night will be cut short by rain, or frozen away. These lights are only ordinary and passing – simple supports. Enough to illuminate a night out, but not enough to support us when it all breaks down. Tama had support, whanau and all, and from what we know there were structures in place. He had those who would help to mediate grief. For us, it’s an early morning phone call. With the lights out, you can hear voices carrying through the whole house. You know straight away that something’s wrong, that someone’s died. Notifications like these always have an infrastructure, that’s what they’re for – to initiate a way of speaking over things to mediate them, in order to figure them out and form a collaborative and uniform response.

On the absence of light and colour

My father dreams of flying; in imagining the totality of the perspective from that height I realise the terror of seeing the whole of the earth (an isolation that nears one to disappearance). After seeing so many satellite images from space where everything moves close in, ever closer to the earth as locus, to some point of significance, I see that you must forget the conduit that enables this vision and its distance – its defiance. You have to deny that gravity is something that you must tear yourself away from, in order to sustain the high. And while my father dreams of flying, I dream of hitting the solid earth and lying in the black land.

She works nights and I work the day.

She is the alpha and the omega.
She gets home at night and wakes in the morning to start the day.

We are not from here.

*Nō tawhiti maua.*

That’s me acknowledging how little we matter to youse who are here. You have said as much.

We are trying to live. Don’t press us any further than that.

I hear my son cough through the wall in the other room. He doesn’t know how to spit out phlegm. He lies on his back and keeps coughing it back into his mouth. I get up and turn him over. I don’t sleep well when he’s sick. He tells me sometimes that he needs to go to the doctor. When we take him, they don’t give him anything. They say he has had a virus, and that the virus has passed. Another two weeks and he’ll be alright.

Hey, you up? Missus got one of those soft fake fur blankets on. Hers ain’t got the tigers. It’s just grey/blue. I wanna see the couch roar in yellow and orange. But, nah, she’s asleep. I join her and sit back and think about what we’ve got. I seen a spark of a halo come up off of the TV, leaving light pointed sharp up at the ceiling. Sending light over the grit of applied brush strokes. Paint scraped and dull, covered over and over. Plaster over plaster. Where landlords have covered the history of replaced tenants. White over white. And white over us.

I can’t see it but I can sense it floating just a bit up there, in that airspace above my head. I have always felt that sword of Damocles. Even without a kingdom or an empire, there is still a fatalist fear of anxiety and trepidation that triggers when questioning one’s relationship to power and powerlessness.

Tonight the ceiling looks like it might collapse, I see it’s dimpled like an ageing body. I see it and the whole house as a body, a single body. And I look back in my mind in order to see where I am. I look back to the houses of a thousand bodies. And how somewhere in my mind I know that a *whare* built of ancestors will stand forever. And I think of the *urupa*. And bodies downed and buried. And the bodies that have voice, that stand around and lament. And I think there should be another house. One that we will make without you, reader (think, are you a tourist here?). A house out of those lost and of the living. Of distance and difference, that becomes just one house. One wā that’s made of all and no places. Of all times and non-time.
Sometimes you can be too close to death, that it sorta sticks. And you have one foot in this world and the other in the next. At times I feel like Pocahontas when she left the new world for the old. Or the known for the unknown. Sometimes I feel like her, sometimes I think that maybe when she stepped on that boat she knew that she was destined to die in a foreign land. I remember that my boat was my dad’s ute [UV] – did I know where I was going? I wonder – why the fuck did I leave? Why am I here? Heretaunga for Tamaki-makau-rau? Then I remember: it was a connection, found between me and a person who had read what I had written that brought me here. It was a moment when I saw another see me.

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Rangituhia Hollis (Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Kahungunu) is an artist, writer and educator (www.rangituhia.com). His practice employs a range of collaborative strategies, often resulting in large-scale digital animation video works or interactive social engagement projects that explore New Zealand’s postcolonial context. He often develops work using emerging or unconventional technologies. He has exhibited throughout New Zealand in leading public museums and galleries.